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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003568

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARONITE PATRIARCH, PREOCCUPIED WITH  
RISING TENSIONS, SEEKS "NEUTRAL" PRESIDENT

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) The Maronite Patriarch expressed his concern over the potential for confrontation over Michel Aoun and Hizballah's demand for a cabinet expansion. Having met with Aoun in recent days, the Patriarch confirmed that he is as single-minded as ever in his pursuit of the presidency. While Aoun agreed in their meeting not to join Hizballah in potential street protests to bring down the government, the Patriarch fears that Aoun may find an excuse to involve his followers in such actions nevertheless. The Patriarch doubts that Hizballah will stand by Aoun to the end, but Aoun believes it will. Syria and Iran are actively interfering in Lebanon and attempting to subvert the GOL. Finally, in a departure from previous comments to us supporting March 14 candidates like Nassib Lahoud, the Patriarch expressed his opinion that Lebanon should have a "neutral" president beholden to neither political bloc and respected by both. Recent moves by three Maronite leaders suggest that he may have hinted at this to them as well. End Summary.

2. (SBU) The Ambassador called on Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfayr in Bkirke November 6. Polchief accompanied as notetaker. Referring to recent Washington consultations, the Ambassador conveyed to Sfayr the continuing deep USG support for Lebanon. The Patriarch said he was aware of USG support and grateful, but that the situation in Lebanon is "not good." He mentioned his concern over Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's pledge to take to the streets unless progress is made toward a cabinet expansion within the first week of talks in the Speaker Berri-sponsored national consultations. The Ambassador agreed that the Hizballah threat is tantamount to blackmail and that Lebanese parties must not resort to the street to solve their differences.

AOUN'S AMBITION

3. (C) The Ambassador mentioned his deep concern over the position of Michel Aoun. He noted that Aoun's supporters appeared to be coordinating their actions with Damascus as well as Hizballah. The Patriarch replied that Aoun wants to be President at any price. "It is his only idea." It will not be easy for him, however, he predicted.

14. (C) The Patriarch noted that he had told Aoun in his visit to Bkirke the previous week that Aoun should not go into the streets with Hizballah. Aoun said that he would not but, Sfayr predicted, Aoun will arrange for a pretext to be pulled into any demonstrations that do occur. "If we tell him not to go to the street, he will agree" but his followers will go and he will claim that it was without his authorization or encouragement. Aoun will follow Hizballah and do what it does, Sfayr added.

15. (C) The Ambassador reminded Sfayr of the role he played following the March 14, 2005 demonstrations at a time when Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and other anti-Syrians were prepared to march on Baabda Palace to turn out President Emile Lahoud by force. The Patriarch almost singlehandedly called the proposed move to a stop, saying that it would be unacceptable to remove the President by force. When asked, Sfayr said that he would make a similar appeal, should it become necessary, for Maronites to eschew demonstrations designed to topple the Siniora government. Differences must be resolved in institutions, not in the streets, Sfayr said. The Patriarch claimed that his Sunday homily contained exactly those sentiments (albeit in a more veiled version than used in March 2005, no doubt because Sfayr is sensitive to Aoun's popularity).

16. (C) Many Christians are no longer following Aoun, Sfayr said, and "that is why he came to see me." His reputation and popularity are slipping. Aoun told Sfayr, "I am a candidate, but if you tell me which other candidate you support I will support him too." This was a ruse, Sfayr and the Ambassador noted, as Aoun realizes Sfayr would not openly endorse any particular candidate and risk annoying all other

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Maronite candidates. The Ambassador noted that should Aoun become President due to his relationship with Hizballah, USG relations could become more difficult.

17. (C) The Ambassador asked whether there is any way to move Aoun away from Hizballah. Sfayr did not know, and replied that Aoun believes Hassan Nasrallah will sustain him until he is President. Sfayr expressed doubt that Nasrallah would continue to be loyal to Aoun to that point. Aoun's alliance with Hizballah is a threat to the balance of Lebanese politics, and it is this potential for disequilibrium that has convinced many Christians to leave Lebanon, perhaps as many as 200,000 during the war, Sfayr lamented.

#### THE SECURITY SITUATION

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18. (C) The Ambassador noted that USG support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) is accelerating and asked what else we might do to strengthen Lebanon's state institutions. The Patriarch responded that the USG is doing well to help the army but that Syria and Iran are interfering and giving orders to their agents here. Despite the denials of many, this is a reality. Hassan Nasrallah's vision for Lebanon is not accepted by the Lebanese people, but he feels his strength and believes he can govern by force. Problems between Israeli forces and the French and German components of UNIFIL do not help the situation.

19. (C) The Ambassador noted that Sfayr talks to LAF G-2 Georges Khoury regularly and asked Sfayr what he thought the LAF would do in the case of a threat from street demonstrations against the government. Sfayr responded that the LAF is ready to oppose demonstrators but that no one knows what the Shia members in the LAF might do in the case of an actual confrontation.

110. (C) Lebanon's problems are the problems of its neighbors, Sfayr said. "We are the puppets. Hassan Nasrallah is proud that he has kept 20,000 rockets and lost none of his arsenal. For him, 1,000 killed is nothing. The life of a man is

worthless. Aoun ignores this because he has one obsession."

A "NEUTRAL" PRESIDENT

¶11. (C) The Ambassador noted that at the opening of the October parliamentary session, there was widespread dismissal and disrespect for President Lahoud. With no one rising to defend the presidency, such attacks erode the credibility of the office. Moreover, with Lahoud's long and ineffectual tenure, there may be an erosion of the power of and respect for the presidency over the long term. Isn't it time, the Ambassador asked, to solve the problem by finding a way to replace Lahoud. The Patriarch responded that Michel Aoun can not fulfill the President's role nor restore the office. "We need someone who will be neutral toward all the parties," he added. "Aoun cannot, because of his arrangement with Hizballah."

¶12. (C) Sfayr emphasized that Lebanon needs a change of presidents soon because the country needs both a government and an opposition (i.e., a loyal opposition) but also national unity. He added that he had not told Aoun this (as Aoun opposes the election of a president by the current Parliament). The Ambassador suggested that March 14 representatives would push for an early presidential election during the ongoing national consultations, but Sfayr doubted that Lahoud could be replaced before the end of his term because of the Syrian and Iranian and Syrian backing he enjoys.

¶13. (C) When pressed to name a potential Lahoud successor, Sfayr said that Lebanon does not need a "party man." He could not be a March 8 or March 14 figure, he suggested; the successor must be an "honorable man" who keeps equal distance from both groups. This idea will be opposed by both parties, both of which want the office.

¶14. (C) The Patriarch then raised the name of Jean Obeid. He noted that Obeid would come to see him in two days. While Obeid had been "Damascus' man" before last year, he had

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allegedly fallen out with Bashar al-Assad. When asked by the Ambassador whether he is sufficiently influential among Lebanese, Sfayr replied that Obeid remains close to Syrian "collaborators" in Lebanon. (Note: It was unclear whether Sfayr meant to suggest that he might support Obeid, a former Foreign Minister and Maronite MP from Tripoli, as a potential candidate, or just sharing gossip. We suspect the latter. We noted also that MP and clear presidential hopeful Boutros Harb may be trying to position himself as a neutral candidate, for example by skipping the most recent March 14 coordination meeting. Finally, Justice Minister Charles Rizk is a neutral candidate by default, having been appointed by and recently falling out with President Lahoud, and has been spreading word that he enjoys the Patriarch's support. End note.)

ELECTORAL LAW AND TIMING

¶15. (C) The Ambassador noted that Aoun insisted on having parliamentary elections before choosing a new president. Sfayr said that March 14 parties might not win another parliamentary election; "I don't know if they have the means." Sfayr expressed frustration on the electoral law, complaining that the project to draft a new law has been in process for five months. It should be sent to the Chamber of Deputies to be examined without delay.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Not so long ago, Patriarch Sfayr was clearly behind a March 14 candidate for president. Even though he demured

from backing a specific candidate, one could play a game of process of elimination by providing names of presumed presidential aspirants and gauging his reaction. Nassib Lahoud seemed to be an early favorite, for example, with Boutros Harb close behind. But, this time, the often cryptic Patriarch was uncharacteristically clear that, given Lebanon's severe political divisions, Emile Lahoud's successor should be able to bridge the divide between March 8 and March 14 movements. That eliminates Aoun, of course, as well as Nassib, Boutros, Nayla Mouawad, and others. While opportunistic Maronites eager for the presidency abound, few come to mind who could credibly be considered "neutral" and of bridge-building capabilities. Minister of Justice Charles Rizk indeed comes to mind as one possibility. But we are hearing from a variety of sources that, by virtue of his unexpectedly strong support of the special tribunal, Rizk is now at the very top of the list of ministers Syria and Hizballah most wish to kick out of the cabinet, meaning that garnering March 8 support would be tough for Rizk. Other "technocrats" like Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, believed to have covered up the Bank al-Medina scandal, will be a hard sell for the March 14 crowd.

¶17. (C) In any case, the pro-Syrians and Aoun have by virtue of their saber-rattling and escalating rhetoric scored a victory in moving Sfayr away from March 14 presidency. Frightened by the loss of Christian influence in Lebanon, Sfayr seems to envision that Lebanon's parliament would be headed by the pro-Syrians, Lebanon's cabinet by March 14, and the presidency providing the needed balance (and restoring office's authority in the process). We hope that he is not been too vocal with his desire for a "neutral" presidency with others, lest the March 14 Maronites flee the pro-independence movement in hopes of garnering the Patriarch's approval.  
FELTMAN